# COMPETING THEORIES OF THE ALPHABET

## PHONOLOGY: ACROPHONY

A century has now passed since independent scholar Alan Gardiner popularized the theory that the Alphabet originated as a system of signs whose shapes outline objects (objects whose Semitic names begin with the sound they represent in that writing system). As it appeared to him and others before him, the names of the letters took the names of 'objects traced by the shapes of the letters'; while the sound each letter would represent was taken from the initial letter in the object's name.

Widely accepted to this day, the thesis of an acrophonic origin is advanced as *fact* in most reference works, despite inherent deficiencies – not to mention the puzzle as to why anyone might conceive a mnemonic system based on so many unrelated objects. Neither Gardiner nor others who adopted this view, appear to have questioned the mnemonic efficacy of a system of 20 to 30 signs drawn on an equivalent number of random things (half of them natural, the other half cultural); yet the benefit in an extended mnemonic model clearly grows diffuse when its parts are unrelated.

In other words, given the systemic uselessness of the model in aiding recollection of the full sequence, it begs the question why a model may have been useful at all. After all, the letters – which need not have been modelled on anything – could have been drawn quite as effectively (and had sounds attached to signs) entirely arbitrarily.

While the acrophonic theory had been entertained previously, identification of the associated objects remained contentious. Theodor Nöldeke (1904) attempted to resolve this issue by suggesting that the objects may simply have differed in the earlier proto-Canaanite conception, from the later Phœnician associations (*eg,* 'gaml' "throwing stick" becoming 'gimel' "camel", *etc*). However, as R.A.S. Macalister pointed out, an unresolved problem remained concerning "several letter-names in the Semitic alphabet to which the tortures of the Inquisition have to be applied before a meaning can be extracted from them through Semitic [*The Philistines,* 1913: London, p129]."

The latter issue raised doubts about a putative Semitic origin. "At the outset we all may agree that the big majority of the names are Semitic *in their present form.* But there are a few names that are not Semitic as far as we know. Are these foreign names [Rev Cranston Earl Goddard, *The Origin of the Semitic Alphabet,* 1927: Edinburgh, p67]?"

It bears clarifying that the relation between 'the names of the letters' as we know them, and the sounds they represent, constitutes a secondary acrophonic aspect – while their primary association concerns the object which 'the shape of the letter' traces, and the initial letter in that object's name.

For instance, 'beth', the name of the second letter in the Alphabet, conveys the sound 'b' (the word beth's first letter). But in the model on which the Alphabet is supposed to have been drawn, 'beth' is the Semitic word for "house", which lends both its name and the sound of its initial letter to the sign that purportedly traces the shape of a house. This primary association of letters to objects appeared to hold more promising clues to their conception, than the sounds alone.

Yet while historical evidence for the original sequence of the letters appears early on, the original letter-names are not attested until much later, leaving open the possibility that the names *as we know them* might conceivably have been a later accretion, and consequently that the source of the letters may in fact have been something other than the objects settled upon so recently by Gardiner and others.

As tabulated by Goddard (1927), "The names may be divided into three classes: (1) those that have definite meaning; (2) those that have a doubtful meaning; (3) those that have no meaning at all. As to the Semitic meaning of *'alf, bet, delt, wau, yod, mem, nun* (or *nahash*), *ain, pe, rosh, shin,* and *tau,* there is little doubt. Most scholars would admit them to mean respectively ox, house, door hook, hand, water, fish (or serpent), eye, mouth, head, tooth, and cross.... There are four other names considered doubtful. They are *gaml, zai, lamd,* and *semk. These are the hypothetical pronunciations of the names deduced by Nöldeke.... Then, a third group, there are five names generally considered without any Semitic meaning at all.... They are *he, het, tet, sade* and *qof* [Rev Cranston Earl Goddard, *The Origin of the Semitic Alphabet,* 1927: Edinburgh, p59–61]."

If the signs were in fact modelled on anything, it would arguably have proven advantageous to base them on something integral – for instance a model whose parts correspond. The model would thus retain a coherent systemic function as 'a sequential memory-aid' to the constituent parts in the sequence drawn from it.

No such model was known when Gardiner drew his conclusion, but the recent discovery of one, argues for the reevaluation of 'a questionable consensus' which is both historically recent, and untenably bound to an incoherent group of systemically-unrelated referents importing no apparent sequential mnemonic advantage to the derived system. It bears noting, however, that at least one scholar suggested that the conjectured objects might profitably be divided into opposing terrestrial and maritime arcs (in addressing coherence).

Given the remarkable compliance of key letters of the Alphabet to their corresponding components in this recently-discovered model, it remains unlikely that Gardiner would ever have entertained the random assemblage he settled on, had it been drawn to his attention. Yet, like all scholars before and after him, he was historically deprived the opportunity of weighing the merits of this insight before drawing his conclusion.

Current theories about the origin of the Alphabet which have all ignored the possibility that a more comprehensive model on which it was based might exist, in other words, must be considered partial, in not having weighed all the evidence. Detractors who categorically cite 'prevailing wisdom' in dismissing previously unexamined insights (such as the new lunar model), clearly fail to appreciate that they perpetuate their consensus model through ignorance.

**MORPHOLOGY: FORMAL AND ORDINAL**

The shapes of the letters appear to be traceable to earlier writing systems (for instance those of Egypt, Crete and Syria); while they also resemble prehistoric 'geometric signs'. Yet some contend the names of the letters of the Alphabet may have preceded their shapes (shapes consequently modelled after the objects they named). Such speculations frame the debate over priority of shape or name.

Likewise, the order of the letters, while remarkably consistent over time, has failed to surrender its secret; leading scholars to conclude that it possibly had little or no functional significance when set. This constitutes a separate inquiry into ordinal significance.

By extension, the questions of 'meaning' behind the shapes of the letters and their order, categorically involve their model.

Generally, a mnemonic model acts as a memory aid to the recollection of a memorized sequence. But in the case of the Alphabet, the letters, as will be shown, were apparently themselves conceived as mnemonics to the sequence they model.

Which raises the possibility that prevailing insights into the Alphabet (such as an acrophonic origin) may in fact be the product of faulty modelling.

"Great big dogs fight ants" provides no clue to its mnemonic function. The recovery of an ulterior meaning (an acrophonic aid to the order of musical notes in the bass-clef staff) involves first recognizing the likelihood that a line this odd might incorporate mnemonic prompts, then identifying the model they point to. In contrast, memorizing the ABCs directly proves far less cumbersome than first recollecting the names of 22 antecedent objects.

You'd hardly entice kids out of bed early in the morning who failed to realize that "the early bird gets the worm" was about something other than worms.

Just as the prevailing model of the Alphabet survives despite its defects, convergences in the new lunar model don't explain all the letters, but their application opens unsuspected insights (as shown in the examples provided in *The Lunar Basis of Myth & Symbol*).

That short primer and several other studies of the lunar model are freely accessible at Internet Archive (search "Drumbolis").


**LUNAR RELATION**

In 1995 I noticed a previously undetected association between the Alphabet and the moon, which led to a thesis about its conception. Several key letters appear to have originated as symbols not only representing, but also tracing the phases of the lunation.

The third letter (C) resembles the third phase (waxing crescent); the ninth letter theta (Θ), the ninth phase (waxing halfmoon); the 15th letter (O), the 15th phase (first full moon); while the first two letters incorporate single (A) and double (B) sighting vertices respectively (like scopes), with a cancel-line struck through, in accordance with the first two (dark) nights of the lunation when no moon is visible in the sky.

Second full moon (on day 16 of the cycle) is represented by a square-like character resembling a trilithon (Π, the 16th letter in the Alphabet), whose adoption in mathematics (pi) appropriately denotes the geometrical relation between the diameter and circumference of a circle. A diameter, when projected outward in the four cardinal directions (in tangent with the circumference of the circle symbolizing the full moon on day 16), which encloses the circle in a square. In other words, the figure of the related square proves a fitting symbol for differentiating the second or 'squared' full moon from the first.

The 17th letter (Q) likewise accords with the first waning phase (occurring on day 17), a full circle (like the preceding phase, full moon) trailing a tail to the right, a downstroke arguably signifying 'descent' (day 17 inaugurating the waning or descending arc of the lunation). The first night of the waning arc is accordingly identifiable by the sliver shaved appropriately from the right side of the full moon.

And the letter X (chi) represents the waning half-moon as a reflection (or mirror-image) of its waxing correlative: the oblique line of the waning half-moon inclined in opposition to that of its waxing counterpart (as they actually appear).

These focal letters display three key points of convergence with the lunation: FORMAL: the letters appear to be drawn from their corresponding phases; ORDINAL: both fall in the same places in their respective sequences; and SPECTRAL: they involve the only phases in the lunation identifiable on sight. Such characters would obviously prove ideal in keeping track of recognizable phases over extended periods of time (by marking the appropriate letter-pictures in successive cells of a blank calendar register).

Attempts to track the other twenty unidentifiable phases will result in confusion, as it remains difficult to distinguish empirically, for instance, between the concave phases which appear nightly between waxing crescent (on the third night of the lunation) and waxing half-moon (on the ninth). Yet letter markers for those and the other unidentifiable phases would be necessary to complete the calendar grid.

It bears noting that one of the earliest adoptions of alphabetic script (at Ugarit) included thirty letters (in cuneiform); in apparent conformity with lunar cycle. While the 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet – which are characterized as three 'mothers', twelve 'simples' and seven 'doubles' – add up to 29 when those 'doubles' are factored in.

My books make it clear that the lunar theory of the Alphabet resolves many questions of ancient history, which Gardner's acrophonic postulate leaves unanswered. While, given their apparent conformity, the fact that the convergence of letters and lunar phases had never before been noticed, is hardly insignificant. Within the purview of Occam's Razor, then, the question remains why a comparably modern theory involving 22 unrelated objects, might prevail over a more efficient theory involving a single source of origin. What else is there to recommend it besides tradition – a tradition little more than a century old.


Nick Drumbolis
*lettersbookshops@gmail.com*


Note that while the term 'phase' today describes eight compass points within the lunation, it is used here to designate 'face' (the moon's nightly change of face presenting a mystery that induced extended observation throughout history). Those who contend that the vagaries of lunar cycle hardly required sustained observation, may not appreciate that it wasn't until 1919 that its complexities were fully understood.


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